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SRI ARAVINDA GHOSE

AND

HIS ASHRAM

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SRI ARAVINDA GHOSE

AND

HIS ASHRAM

No modern institution in India is shrouded in such mystery and at the same time looked on with so much interest as the Ashram of Sri Aravinda Ghose at Pondichery. What is he doing there? Mere spiritual austerities? Has he forgotten the one passion of his early life—the freedom of the Motherland? And popular interest is increased by the fact that some of our well-known political workers have been drawn irresistibly to the Ashram. Surely they cannot have bid good-bye to patriotism.

In many respects, the life of Sri Aravinda Ghose has been a chapter of mysteries. Brought up almost from childhood in England and leading a comfortable life later on in Baroda, he suddenly renounced it and plunged into the vortex of politics and wrested the leadership of the New Nationalist Movement in almost a few weeks. Few anticipated such a renunciation and when he came out, Bengal found with pleasant surprise that far from being lost to the Motherland by his foreign breeding and habits, he was not only an Indian to the core, but had been a very close student of contemporary politics. No less surprising was his final plunge—from politics to spiritual life.

Sri Aravindo came from an illustrious family. His maternal grandfather was an ardent patriot and his father was a successful physician. But the two differed vitally in their outlook on life. The former was a frank supporter of Indian ideals; but the latter was all for western ways. Hence it was that as a

child Sri Aravindo found himself in an English school, and his most impressionable years were accordingly spent in a foreign country. He did not even know his mother tongue. His first endeavour in life was to enter the I. C. S. and he stood tenth in the literary test; but he was disqualified for poor horse-riding. The youth then completed his course at Cambridge graduating in 1892, getting a first class in classical tripos.

Happily he came into contact with the Gaekwar of Baroda who was then so ardently trying to build up a model administration and was taken up at once in his personal staff. Promotions followed quickly and a number of changes in his office until he finally found himself the vice-Principal of the Baroda College on Rs. 750 a month—by no means a small salary in those days. Thus, though disappointed in entering the heaven-born service, he had an excellent start in life, better than what falls to the lot of an average member of the I. C. S. specially as he was the favourite of the Ruler.

It was at such a fortunate period in his life that he found himself irresistibly drawn to his own province, Bengal, which just at that time was passing through most mortifying experiences. Lord Curzon was on the Viceregal gadi and was giving full effect to his ideal that administration and exploitation must go hand in hand. From the start, he had been a determined foe of Bengal and with a view to break the growing solidarity of the province had planned the partition and carried it into effect in spite of severe opposition. To weaken the protest, he had gone so far as to divide the Hindus and Moslems by showing special favouritism to the latter—the status of the favourite wife, as one of his agents publicly said—and what was even more intolerable, the Viceroy lost no opportunity to insult the Indian nation and the Bengalis in particular.

Though stationed at the other corner of India, Sri Aravindo was closely watching these developments and even

before he left for Bengal he had surprised his friends by a letter to the *Indu Prakash* in which he criticised the feeble methods of the National Congress in combating the administrative blunders. Soon after, towards the close of 1905, he came to Bengal to have a personal knowledge of the situation ; and his experiences were naturally shocking. The last public function that he attended was the Barisal Conference in March, 1906 which was broken up in the most offensive fashion by the District Magistrate. *Lathis* were freely used on the delegates and visitors. The uncrowned king of Bengal, Surendranath Banerjee, was openly insulted by the Magistrate and for protesting, he was fined Rs. 200 for contempt.

Takes the Plunge

This scene proved the last straw and when Sri Aravindo returned to Baroda soon after, he had decided that his rightful place was in the midst of his own people in this sacred struggle.

Sri Aravindo's first endeavour in Bengal was the creation of facilities for proper education and the urge for this came, as usual, from the Government, who had forced educational authorities to send out a number of students for associating themselves with politics. The Bengal leaders felt that some provision must be made for their continued education and the occasion was naturally utilised to see that the new institution did not suffer from defects inherent in the official schools. The famous National Council of Education was thus formed and Sri Aravindo became the first Principal on a pittance of only Rs. 60 a month. The Council declared :

"The system of officially controlled education is shallow and rootless. It imparts the shadow and not the substance of modern culture.

"It leads to a fearful waste of time and energy by imposing the necessity of learning a foreign language and of

receiving instruction through its medium in all higher branches of study.

"It is controlled by an alien bureaucracy in the interests mainly of its own political position.

"It is excessively literary and detrimental to the economic life of the country."

At this stage came his first disillusionment. Very soon, he found the members of the management weakening. A good number seemed to have been cowed down by the repressive wave; anyway, they would not displease the bureaucrats, with the result that the Council soon proclaimed that its endeavour was not to supplant the official institutions but to supplement them! In such a chill atmosphere, Sri Aravindo naturally felt uncomfortable and realised the need for the creation of a more stalwart and independent temperament among the public workers, for which he soon found an opportunity in the *Bande Mataram*.

This great daily had a wonderful career, brief though it was. Within a few weeks of its start, it found itself in the position of a National newspaper—the first to secure that distinction in India. Soon after his arrival in Calcutta, Sri Aravindo was invited to be its contributor; and very soon its complete editorial control passed into his hands. And it was a most happy development, for he found scope to infuse a new ideal into our public life not only in Bengal but all over the country. The contents of the *Bande Mataram* were devoured by thousands, of people all over the country, by youths in particular, and so overwhelming was its appeal that even distant readers, preserved a complete file of the weekly edition for constant reference.*

* Most of these files were seized by the Police. Happily, the writer was fortunate enough to save one which went back to Sri Aravindo when nearly twenty years later he expressed a desire to have these back copies.

Each copy passed through several hands, very often without the knowledge of the elders and school authorities.

His Main Appeal

Sri Arvindo's most pointed appeal was in the sphere of Swadeshi; and he gave it a comprehensive spiritual turn. To realise God, he urged, is the mission of man. We can realise Him only by fulfilling ourselves in our individual and national life. In order to fulfil our national life, we must realise our separateness as a people and we can best realise our separateness by being Swadeshi in all departments of human activity. This comprehensive ideal, thanks to Mahatma Gandhi, is now accepted as axiomatic, but when Sri Aravindo preached it, it was not only new but was keenly resented as much by the Government as by a vast majority of our own politicians.

Sri Aravindo was the first of our leaders to claim freedom for India in the widest sense of the word. Till then, the ideal that Congress leaders preached was colonial Self-Government or Home Rule; but Sri Aravindo went far ahead:

"It has been the *mantra* of my life to aspire towards the freedom of my Nation. If to aspire for independence is a crime, you may cast me to gaol and bind me with chains. But freedom does not mean the use of violence, it means only the fulfilment of our separate national existence."

"Hold fast to your faith and act upon your convictions. And if in so acting you are met with repression, suffer it with patience. But whether acting or suffering, always be strong." Was not this creed the forerunner of Gandhism?

In this mission, he received considerable support from Lok. Tilak who, though not so outspoken, was heartily in agreement with Sri Aravindo's views. The two worked in close association and at the Surat Congress (1907) their combined strength was first experienced by the Nation. The weakened politicians claimed the success; but it was really with the New Party, which went into exile only to capture

the national organisation in ten years—scattering the wobblers into perpetual oblivion.

The Bomb Case and Spiritual Experiences

It was in the midst of this great work that the executive swooped down on Sri Aravindo. On the 2nd of May, 1908, the police raided his house before day-break, handcuffed, and bound him by a rope round the waist and took him to the prison like a desperate felon. The charge was that he was implicated in the bomb conspiracy, with which his brother and several youthful Nationalists were also charged.

The sessions trial opened on 23rd October and Mr. C. R. Das took charge of the defence. The Government of Bengal had gone out of the way to engage Mr. Norton specially for the prosecution and he addressed the assessors for sixteen days. The defence arguments occupied only half that time and Mr. Das took up the position that instead of being persecuted and prosecuted, the illustrious accused deserved to be honoured as a prophet:

“Long after this controversy is hushed to silence” he said in conclusion, “long after this turmoil, this agitation will have ceased, long after he is dead and gone, he will be looked upon as the poet of patriotism, as the prophet of Nationalism and as the lover of humanity. His words will be echoed and re-echoed not only in India, but over distant seas and distant lands.”

The assessors declared him to be not guilty and after a month's intense suspense, on the 6th of May, their opinion was ratified by the Judge, Mr. Beachcroft, who, by a strange coincidence was Sri Aravindo's fellow candidate in the I.C.S.

It was during this period, a year's enforced stay in jail, that he had the great spiritual experience which completely transformed his later life.

He himself described them in his famous Uttarapara speech:

"When I was arrested and hurried to the Lala Bazar Hayat, I was shaken in my faith for a while. I cried out in my heart to him: 'What is this that has happened to me? I believed that I had a mission to work for the people of my country and until that work was done, I should have thy protection. Why then am I here and on such a charge?' A day passed, and a second day and a third, when a voice came to me and said: 'Wait and see'.....

"I remembered then that a month or more before my arrest, a call had come to me to put aside all activities, to go into seclusion and to look into myself so that I might enter into closer communion with Him. I was weak and could not accept the call. My work was very dear to me and in the pride of my heart I thought that unless I was there, it would suffer or even fail and cease; therefore I could not leave it.

"It seemed to me that he spoke to me again and said: 'The bonds you had not strength to break, I have broken for you, because it is not my will, nor was it ever my intention that that should continue. I have had another thing for you to do and it is for that I have brought you here, to teach you what you could not learn for yourself and to train you for my work.'

"Then He placed the Gita in my hands. His strength entered into me and I was able to do the sadhan of the Gita. I was not only to understand intellectually but to realise what Sri Krishna demanded of Arjuna and what he demands of those who aspire to do his work....."

"It was while I was walking outside the cell that His strength again entered into me. I looked at the jail that secluded me from men and it was no longer by its high walls that I was imprisoned: no, it was Vasudeva that surrounded me. I walked under the branches of the tree in front of my cell; but it was not the tree; I knew it was Vasudeva, it was Sri Krishna whom I saw standing there and holding over me

His shade. I looked at the bars of my cell, the very grating that did duty for a door and again I saw Vasudeva. It was Narayana who was guarding and standing sentry over me. As I lay on the coarse blankets that were given me for a couch I felt the arm of Sri Krishna around me; the arms of my Friend and Lover. This was the first use of the deeper vision He gave me. I looked at the prisoners in the jail, the thieves, the murderers, the swindlers, and as I looked at them, I saw Vasudeva. It was Narayana whom I found in those darkened souls and misused bodies....."

"The same vision continued even in court. The Magistrate, the prosecuting counsel—every one was Vasudeva.

"Arrangements which had been made for my defence were suddenly changed and another counsel stood there to defend me. He came unexpectedly—a friend of mine, but I did not know he was coming. He put away from him all other thoughts and abandoned all his practice, sat up half the night day after day for months and broke his health to save me. It was Sriji Chittaranjan Das. When I saw him, I was satisfied, but I still thought it necessary to write instructions. Then all that was put from me and I had the message from within: 'This is the man who will save you from the snares put around your feet. Put aside those papers. It is not you who will instruct him. I will instruct him.' From that time I did not of myself speak a word to my counsel."

"Then in the seclusion of the cell, I asked: 'Give me Thy *Adesh*. I do not know what work to do and how to do it. Give me a message?' In the communion of Yoga, two messages came. The first said: 'I have given you a work and it is to uplift this nation.' The second message came and it said: 'Something has been shown to you in this year of seclusion, something about which you had your doubts and it is the truth of the Hindu religion. It is this religion that I am raising up before the world and it is this I have developed

and perfected through the *Rishis*, saints and *Avatars* and now it is going forth to do my work among the nations. I am raising up this nation to send forth My Word.....I am giving it freedom for the service of the world.....It is Shakti that has gone forth and entered into the people. Long ago, I have been preparing this uprising and now the time is come and it is I who will lead it to its fulfilment.' "

Sri Aravindo did not however devote himself exclusively to spiritual endeavour as soon as he was acquitted. He continued to devote sometime to politics and started the weekly *Karmayogin* to expound his creed. But that was found possible for only a few months. For some writings in that paper, a warrant was issued against him ; and this fresh attempt to stop his activities came at a moment when he had almost decided to devote himself to spiritual work, for which, he found it essential to quit Bengal and British territory.

His departure was dramatic. No one knew, until he himself wrote to the press several weeks later, where he had gone. Some said that he had retired to the Himalayas ; some others asserted that he had been seen in this or that part of India, including Madras city. Few suspected that he had reached Pondichery ; and the mystery of it was deepened by the fact that he had to get a passport from a European official, who must have known that a warrant was out against him. The Bengal police had, at least once, to confess that a divinity shapes our ends, however ardently they may wish otherwise..

Future of Indian Politics

His last political utterance showed how India can and must face repression. Form, he said, a mighty association embracing every son of the land, brother and brother massed inseparably together, bound to each other by one common interest, the service of the Mother—an association which no force can break up. It need have no chairman or secretary or any other office-bearer to receive specific official attention.

That, he said, is the ideal of the Kaliyuga and it is the ideal towards which humanity, India in particular, is irresistibly moving.

"Realise God in the Nation, realise God in your brother, realise God in a wide human Association."

These views were supplemented in his farewell article in the *Karmayogin*, wherein, he indicates lines of political activity with which India has been familiarised by Gandhiji. Passive resistance was one of them—the name of Satyagraha was given to it far later—and Sri Aravindo suggested even the non-payment of taxes. These proposals were by no means new. Not only had they been given a practical shape by Gandhiji in South Africa, but in India itself, they had been frequently discussed in Nationalist circles. But to Sri Aravinda Ghose belongs the credit of tabulating them in the form of a definite policy. And it created almost a shudder in the Congress circles of those days. To them, even boycott was too strong. So, many of those "statesmen" must have heaved a sigh of relief when they learnt that Sri Aravindo could not be present in British India to put those "dangerous" proposals into action. And the only other patriot who could do so, Lok. Tilak, was serving his long term of imprisonment at Mandalay. So the aggressive political movement received a severe blow.

The Start in Pondichery

From the moment he reached Pondichery, he plunged into *tapas* and one gets a glimpse of his life at this time in *Yogic Sadhan*, which, though published under a *nom-de-plume*, is ascribed to him. This period was remarkable for his realisation of the true meaning of the Vedas and to convey the same to the world, the monthly *Arya* was started in 1914. Its enlightening articles have been published in book form and have elicited warm appreciation both in India and in foreign lands. The journal was continued till 1920, when he found it necessary to devote all his time to *tapas*.

The discontinuance of the *Arya* was a great misfortune. For, through its pages, he was able to give a correct interpretation of our ancient literature to the world, dissipating several erroneous ideas, which had been put into currency by ignorant western translators or savants, backed indeed, by our pandits, as in respect of human sacrifice, which they held had been extolled in the Vedas. Sri Aravindo showed how those views were due entirely to false interpretation.

By 1921, his spiritual endeavours and his aims had become fairly known and the first batch of disciples came from Gujerat, followed by others from Bengal and other parts of India. Gradually his residence took the shape of an Ashram. Starting with about a dozen inmates their number steadily increased until to-day, there are nearly a hundred resident Sadhaks, with a far larger number outside. The Ashram now involves an expenditure of six to seven thousand rupees per month. Only a few of the Sishyas are paying members; but no fixed contribution is levied and in deserving cases, no payment is expected.

But there is no propaganda, no missionary attempt at collecting disciples. Only those, who of themselves, feel a call within them for a higher or spiritual life, choose to go there. And even from among them, many are turned away; and a few are chosen after a period of trial and suspense.

From 1926, Sri Aravindo is devoting his whole time to *tapas*. He is cut off completely from the outside world—even the resident Sadhaks. Only on three days in the year can he be seen by them: his birth-day on 15th August; 24th November, the date of an important event in his spiritual life; and February 21st, the birth-day of the Mother, the French lady, who is in charge of the Ashram. Outsiders can see him only on these three days, and that too with previous permission. All communication between him and the Sishyas.

is through the Mother; and even on those three days, Sri Aravindo does not talk to them.

A few words may here be said about this French lady. She first came into contact with Sri Aravindo as a spiritual aspirant in 1914, but had to return to France soon after. She returned about 1920 and has since been in charge of the Ashram. For all purposes, she is its head, of course deriving her authority from Sri Aravindo and this arrangement has been found necessary so that he may devote all his time for *tapas*.

There are a number of misconceptions in the popular mind about Sri Aravinda Ghose as he now is. Owing largely to the publication of misleading pictures, it is generally believed that as a result of his austerities he is no more than a skeleton. The reverse is the fact. Sri Aravindo is to-day a more massive figure than ever in his life. Those nearest to him have felt that even physically there has been a remarkable development in his stature, which, at this age in his life, is inconceivable to most people. There has been an even more perceptible change in his complexion. His skin is now golden hue, whereas it was dark brown when he entered Pondichery. It is of course true that his requirements in the matter of food and sleep have been reduced to a minimum, but that, instead of undermining his health, has improved it.

His Objective

What is his present objective? To put it broadly, he is aiming at a new era, a new order of life. Perhaps, the reader will better understand his mission through this picture: he feels that the earth is now inhabited by Asuras and they have to be replaced by Gods.

"The quiet Tapasya and silent soul-force of a Buddha or a Christ has uplifted the world and started a new civilisation. Buddha preached Nirvana; yet out of his Sadhana and truth sprang a new culture, a revitalised art and literature which rejuvenated vast empires and sent out dynamic waves of spirituality which knit Asia with its several Continents into one. It is really quietude, the power of self-contained static calm, which can hold and give birth to world transforming forces. The calm of Shiva stands behind the Force that we call Durga and Kali. A quiet and concentrated *tapasya*

can liberate and bring down a mighty power which works to build the world anew.”*

“European science is conquering nature in a way. It has attained to a certain kind and measure, in some fields a great measure of control over the physical processes of nature; but it is a control of her most external movements and not a central conquest and however great or striking it may be, in its own province, it does not touch man in his more intimate reality and does not bring about any true change in his destiny or his being. For the most vital part of nature is the region of life-forces—the powers of disease and age and death, of strife and greed and lust—all the instincts of the brute in man, all the dark aboriginal forces, the forces of ignorance that form the very ground-work of man’s nature and his society. And then, as we rise next to the world of the mind, we find a twilight region where falsehood masquerades as truth, where prejudices move as realities, where notions rule as ideals.

“This is the present nature of man with its three-fold nexus of mind and life and body that stands there to be fought and conquered. This is the inferior nature, of which the ancients spoke, that holds man down inexorably to a lower dharma, an imperfect mode of life—the life that is and has been the human order till to-day. No amount of ceaseless action, however selflessly done, can move this wheel of Nature even a hair’s breadth away from the path that it has chalked out from of old. Human nature and human society have been built up and are run by the forces of this inferior nature: and whatever shuffling and reshuffling we may make in its apparent factors and elements, the general scheme and the fundamental form of life will never change. To displace earth (and to conquer nature means nothing less than that) and give it another orbit, one must find a fulcrum outside earth.”

Sri Aravindo does not preach flight from life and a retreat into the silent and passive infinite. The goal of life is not in his view the extinction of life. But neither is he satisfied on that account to hold that life is best lived in the ordi-

* The writer is indebted for these details about the Ashram to prominent Sadhaks resident at Pondichery.

nary round of its unregenerate dharma. If the first is a blind alley, the second is a vicious circle—both lead nowhere.

Sri Aravindo realises that it is a stupendous task; but he feels that it has to be taken up, and he thinks that it can be achieved only by getting control of forces or a power that is beyond the ordinary nature. So if he seems to have retreated from life, it is with a set purpose. He is out "to conquer a new plane of creative power—an entrance right into the world of basic forces of fundamental realities, into the flaming heart of things where all actualities are born and take their first shape. It is the discovery of a power-house of tremendous energy and of the means of putting it at the service of earthly life.

Not until he gets at that power, will Sri Aravindo come out of his retirement.

This picture of the sage may seem a bit fantastic for those who are not acquainted with the life of some of the master-minds of humanity, like Buddha. Nor should we overlook the pregnant saying of Sri Vivekananda, that our Rishis of old sent out currents from their forest homes which vitally influenced human life.

The Sadhaks at the Ashram enjoy considerable freedom in their own individual life and meet together once every evening for common meditation. During the rest of the day, they are free to pursue their activities as they are pleased to do. They are supplied their food at the Ashram, which is naturally sparing, thrice a day. Rice is confined to midday, and that a small cup. At other times, milk, bread, curds and plantains.

A casual observer may not find life at the Pondichery Ashram extraordinary in any particular; but the inmates are convinced that their life is not spent in vain nor for selfish ends. Following the lead of their chief, they are active, though on a plane which is not quite perceptible to the average man in the street. They are convinced that in the fulness of time, which is not very distant, all will realise that the years spent by Sri Arivando in "retirement" have been most beneficial to humanity.

[THIRD EDITION]